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‘She’s a *fucking* ticket’: the pragmatics of FUCK in Irish English – an age and gender perspective

Bróna Murphy¹

Abstract

In this paper, I examine the pragmatics of FUCK in terms of age and gender in an Irish English context. The paper aims to explore sociolinguistic variation in the use of this taboo form by using quantitative and qualitative corpus-based tools and methodologies, which include relative frequency lists and concordances, as well as details of formulaic strings, including significant clusters. I show that FUCK is a high-frequency item in everyday talk. I illustrate that, in terms of age and gender, FUCK occurs most frequently among male speakers in their twenties. I also focus on *fucking* as an extremely emotionally charged form that is a high frequency item in the interactions of both the males in their twenties and the males in their forties. I note that the use of this form brings a certain dramatic intensity or dynamism to their discourse. I attribute this intensity to being a feature of how males interact. I conclude by discussing other variables at play in the data.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades research on taboo language has been scarce: Stenström (1991), Jay (1999), McEnery *et al.* (2000) and McEnery and Xiao (2004) all note the lack of studies of this common feature of everyday talk. Jay’s (1999) Neuro-Psycho-Social (NPS) theory of speech redefines language to include cursing because, he argues, language should represent speakers’ knowledge of pragmatics, politeness, figurative language, vulgarity, insults, sex talk, humour, verbal abuse and anger. He adds that such words are ‘normal’, because they obey semantic and syntactic rules, and are unique because they provide an ‘emotional intensity’ to speech that non-curse words cannot.

Methodological approaches to the examination of taboo language have, in the past, relied on questionnaires as one of the main tools used in

¹ Charteris Land, Room 4.7B, Curriculum Research and Development, The Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh, EH8 8AQ, United Kingdom.

Correspondence to: Bróna Murphy, e-mail: brona.murphy@education.ed.ac.uk

data collection (Bailey and Timm, 1976; Hughes, 1992). However, corpus-based approaches that focus on linguistic forms in more naturally occurring settings are now more prevalent (Stenström, 1991, 2006; McEnery and Xiao, 2004). Such a corpus-based approach provides us with a more holistic picture of taboo forms and their social functions, since it allows us an insight into the immediate communicative context, and the influence this has on a speaker's behaviour (Jay, 1999: 147).

To date, studies on taboo language have examined taboo forms in relation to sociolinguistic variables such as social class (Hughes, 1992), age, through the analysis of teenage discourse, (Stenström *et al.*, 2002; Stenström, 2006), and also genre (McEnery and Xiao, 2004; Farr and Murphy, 2009). Few studies have focussed on taboo language across male and female adult discourse in an Irish English context. This study aims to do so by describing and examining the various forms and functions of FUCK² in a 90,000 word age-and-gender-differentiated spoken corpus of Irish English.

2. Defining taboo language

Definitions of taboo language vary greatly. Stenström (1991), for example, uses the term 'expletive' to refer to a broad range of words such as *Jesus*, *bloody*, *bastard* and *shit*, and includes them all within this grouping, while Andersson and Trudgill (1990) refer to many of the same words as 'swearwords'. Other researchers such as de Klerk (1991) and Hughes (1992) fail to distinguish between expletives and swearwords. This paper uses the term 'taboo language' broadly to refer to a set of words and expressions that are totally or partly prohibited in society. The anthropologist, Edmund Leach (1966, cited in Andersson and Trudgill, 1990: 15) categorised taboo language in English into three major groups:

- (i) 'Dirty' words that are concerned with sex and excretion, such as *bugger*, *shit* and *fuck*.
- (ii) Words that have to do with the Christian religion, such as *Christ* and *Jesus*.
- (iii) Words which are used in 'animal abuse' (calling a person by the name of an animal), such as *bitch* and *cow*.

The scheme excludes other taboo words such as *nigger*, *spastic* and *queer*, suggesting that categorisation schemes of taboo language are not absolute and can shift over time. It could be argued that Leach (1966) could have added these forms in his original categorisation, since homophobic and racial abuse were certainly present around the time he was writing. However, the

² When this paper refers to FUCK in all its forms, it is written in capitals. When written in lower case, *fuck*, it refers to that word alone.

fact that he did not consider them to be taboo tells us a good deal about the society in which he wrote and about his own views as a researcher. It would seem that what is taboo and what is not is contested; consequently, categorisations of what is taboo will always be contested. This paper focusses on one of the most common forms of taboo language in English: the expletive FUCK. It examines the use of FUCK in its various forms in Irish English with reference to the sociolinguistic variables, age and gender.

2.1 FUCK

Despite surprisingly little research on taboo language in linguistic research, recent studies by McEnery, Baker and Hardie (2000), McEnery and Xiao (2004), McEnery (2005), Stenström (2006), Allan and Burridge (2006) and Thelwall (2008) have reintroduced taboo language, and especially the impact and use of FUCK in spoken discourse, back into linguistic research. Earlier, Bailey and Timm (1976) identified FUCK as a strong expletive, one which Stenström (2006) found to be the most popular choice of taboo word for teenage girls in her Corpus of London Teenage Talk (COLT).³ McEnery and Xiao (2004) found FUCK to be very frequent in imaginative written texts. It has also been noted that FUCK occurs in a number of different forms, for example, as a verb, an adjective and an interjection. In 2000, when joint research on people's attitudes to swearing and offensive language was carried out by the Advertising Standards Authority, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission (Internet Report, 2000), the general consensus (53 percent) was that while forms such as *nigger*, *Jew* and *spastic*, amongst others, were inappropriate for transmission at any time, only 38 percent of those questioned believed that FUCK should never be broadcast. Aucoin (1999), Sampson (1999) and Sapolsky and Kaye (2005) also highlight how music, film and television have pushed the boundaries of expletive use, where a word like FUCK, which was once considered taboo, is now being regarded as commonplace. This ensures that, as a result, the nature of taboo language is constantly evolving and that certain taboo forms, such as FUCK, are becoming increasingly acceptable in mainstream language use.

3. The Corpus

The data, in this study, take the form of a Corpus of Age and Gender differentiated spoken Irish English (CAG-IE) which was compiled over eight months, from August 2003 to April 2004 in the Republic of Ireland (Murphy, 2007). The corpus consists of two sub corpora, the Male Adult

³ COLT, see: <http://torvald.aksis.uib.no/colt/>

Corpus (MAC) and the Female Adult Corpus (FAC). These were compiled by collecting data from three adult-age cohorts (20s, 40s and 70s/80s) and so consists of six, 15,000⁴ word (approximately) sub-corpora of casual conversation. Taking account of the six sub-corpora, the total size of the corpus is approximately 90,000 words. The speakers are thirty-one volunteers, mainly family members, friends and acquaintances of the author, who were willing to take part in the project. The speakers were asked to record any casual conversation they took part in with interlocutors in their own age bracket (20s, 40s, and 70s/80s). They were not restricted in terms of the topics they were allowed to discuss (see Tables 1⁵ and 2 for information on the topics of conversation). The conversations took place in the home of the participants, in a University setting, in shops, and also while travelling in a car.

It is important to note that many of the conversations consist of just two speakers (dyads) especially in the 40s and 70s/80s data. There is no methodological reason for this—it was due simply to the nature of the data collection and the issues that arise when compiling a spoken corpus, including, for example, the availability of participants, duration of conversations, and so on. However, in the FAC and MAC 20s subcorpora, there are more than two speakers in the majority of the conversations. This is because the recording periods for this group's conversations were shorter due to constraints such as college breaks and the goodwill of the participants. As a result, more recordings involving new participants had to take place to reach the target word count of approximately 15,000 words. The fact that the number of speakers in the FAC 20s group range from two to five and range from two to six in the MAC 20s group has been taken into account when examining the data in Section 4.

Transcription of the data was carried out in line with the conventions employed in the transcription of the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (LCIE)⁶ with features such as speaker tags, repetitions, interruptions, background noise and non-standard contractions being identified. The recordings were transcribed by the researcher and were also viewed and checked for accuracy by three other researchers, two of whom were Irish and one, British. The transcripts were also anonymised so that nobody could be identified. This included changing the names of the actual speakers, the people they mentioned as well as places that they referred to.

The data were examined using a software program for lexical and grammatical analysis, Wordsmith Tools 3 (Scott, 1997). It should be noted that raw frequencies as well as frequencies per million words are provided in order to allow comparisons to be made between groups where different numbers of words were spoken. The raw results are also included. The

⁴ Fifteen thousand words is roughly the equivalent of between sixty and ninety minutes' talk.

⁵ In this and the following table, occurrences are given in words per million. Raw frequencies are also provided in brackets.

⁶ See Limerick Corpus of Irish English, at: <http://www.ul.ie/~lcie/homepage.htm>

	Topic	Speakers	Relationship
FAC 20s	Weekend	Linda, Amy, Ciara	Friends: 4 years
	Personal characteristics and behaviour	Linda, Ciara	Friends: 4 years
	Sleeping	Sarah, Ruth, Anne	Friends: 4 years
	Holiday plans	Mary, Ciara	Friends; share student house together: 3 years
	Drinking games	Sarah, Ruth, Anne, Maura, Deirdre	Friends: 4 years
	Jobs	Louise, Dervla	Friends: 4 years
	Essay/project	Niamh, Grainne	Friends: 2 years
	Night out	Sarah, Ruth, Anne	Friends: 4 years
FAC 40s	Work/Family (divorce, separation, homosexuality, and illness)	Kate, Mairead	Friends because they work together; relationship is much closer than that of mere colleagues: 5 years
	Schools	Mairead, Brenda	Acquaintances; have known each other one year but relationship not classed as friendship
	Mother's Day card	Mairead, Grace	Friends: 20+ years
FAC 70s/ 80s	Family, Politics	Ellen, Marie	Close friendship: 50+ years
	Politics, Neighbours	Ellen, Nora	Close friendship: 50+ years
	Local events, Religion, Politics, Shopping	Ellen, Nora	Close friendship: 50+ years

Table 1: Data Matrix for FAC

quantitative analysis used word-frequency lists which facilitates the very rapid calculation of word frequency lists (or wordlists) for any batch of texts. By running a word frequency list on a corpus, one can obtain a rank ordering of all the words it contains in order of their frequency. WordSmith Tools also allows the user to organise the frequency lists alphabetically. The more qualitative examinations relied on cluster lists and concordance

	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Speakers</i>	<i>Relationship</i>
<i>MAC 20s</i>	Football, going out and making dinner	Tom, David, Joe, Alan, Conor, John	Friends: 4 years
	Sport and when they were younger	Tom, Colin	Friends: 10 years
<i>MAC 40s</i>	Boats, fishing and cars	Mick, Will	Friends/in-laws: 20+ years
	Boats and acquaintances	Mick, Will	Friends: 20+ years
<i>MAC 70s/80s</i>	Sport and acquaintances	Gerard, Denis	Friends: 30+ years
	Work and acquaintances	Gerard, Denis	Friends: 30+ years

Table 2: Data Matrix for MAC

lines, drawing on insights from conversation analysis and discourse analysis. Cluster lists highlight how language systematically clusters combinations of words (e.g., *I mean, this and that and the other*) while concordance lines enable one to search for a word by looking for it in all the chosen text files. The software then presents a display where the search word or phrase is displayed along with their surrounding co-text in the Key Word in Context (KWIC) format. The node word or phrase (i.e., the one that was searched for) appears in the centre of the line.

The speakers who took part in the recordings were also interviewed, and their own accounts of their language use are also used as a form of data in this paper.

4. Analysis

4.1 Quantitative examination of FUCK in Irish English

The first indication that FUCK was an extremely common expletive in the corpus came from an examination of the frequency wordlist, where various forms of the expletive appeared. In comparison to FUCK, the only other expletives occurring in the data, SHIT and PISS,⁷ occurred much less frequently in the corpus, as is evident from Figure 1.

⁷ When this paper refers to SHIT and PISS in all its forms, it is written in capitals. When written in lower case, *shit* and *piss*, it refers to that word alone.

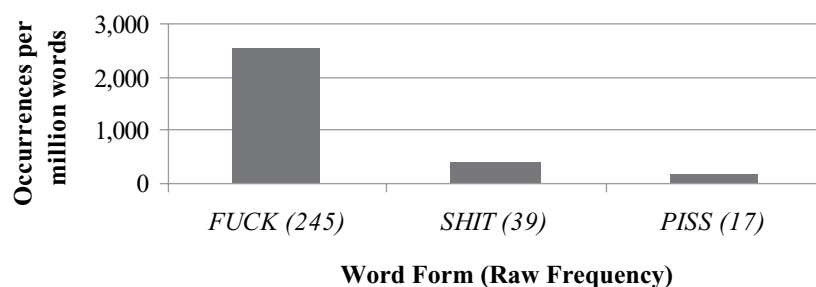


Figure 1: Frequency of FUCK, SHIT, PISS in CAG-IE (occurrences per million words)

This initial observation in spoken discourse is consistent with what McEnery and Xiao (2004: 504) found when examining the use of FUCK in imaginative writing. They state that FUCK was a high frequency word because their data consisted primarily of fiction and, therefore, contained instances of dialogue. Stenström (2006: 5) also found FUCK to be a popular choice of taboo word among London's teenage girls. It is due to its overwhelmingly high frequency in terms of expletives in the corpus that this particular form is being examined. This paper will focus on the pragmatics of FUCK focussing, first, and very briefly, on its frequency and distribution in Irish English and, second, looking at the various forms of FUCK in more detail and in terms of the sociolinguistic variables (gender and age).

If we look more closely at the forms that make up the high frequency of FUCK in the corpus of Irish English, we find that there are four main items. As can be seen from Figure 2, the most common forms of FUCK that occur in the corpus are *fucking*, *fuck*, *fucked* and *fucker(s)*, with *fucking* being the most frequent.

It is interesting to note that, in addition to these forms, another form, *fecking*, also occurs, and that it seems to be particular to Irish English; it could be described as a euphemistic taboo form, and it occurs ten times (104 times per million words) in the corpus. *Fecker* also occurs, but much less frequently: there is only one occurrence (ten times per million words).

There have been no instances of these forms found in any other studies; for example, no occurrences were highlighted in Stenström's (2006) study or indeed in Green's (1998) list of the various derivations, compounds and combinations of FUCK. Such variants of *feck* have been found outside Ireland, probably as a result of the popular television programme *Father Ted* (1995–8). However, according to Ó Méalóid (2005), the form dates back to the mid- to late 1990s. He highlights that when using *fecking*, speakers are, in fact, using an existing word rather than simply shifting a vowel. He states that if the latter were the case, speakers outside Ireland would also be using *fecking*. Furthermore, Ó Méalóid (2005) discusses the Cassell's Dictionary definition of *feck* which highlights its origin in Irish and Scots in the early

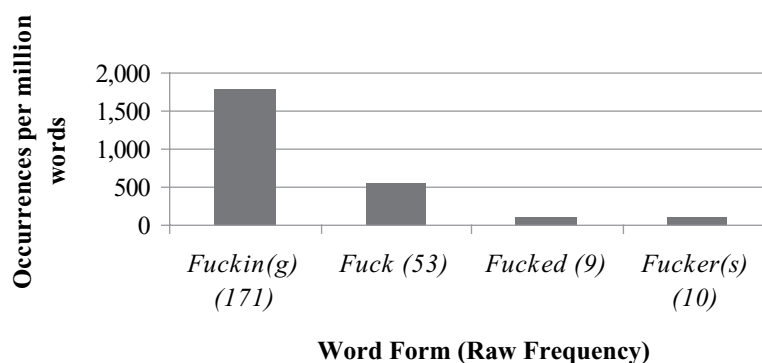


Figure 2: Frequency of FUK in CAG-IE (occurrences per million words)

nineteenth century and notes that it meant ‘to keep a look out’. The entry also highlights an additional meaning by the end of the nineteenth century when it came to mean ‘to steal’. The origins of this meaning came from Old English *feccan* ‘to fetch’ and German *fegen* ‘to plunder’. Ó Méalóid (2005) does not reach any definite conclusions about *fecking*, but notes that it is a euphemistic form whose meaning has been layered on top of a much older expression. He concludes that those who are hearing the word, or using it for the first time, see this euphemistic layer as the substance when it is really a veneer. I have also observed the use of *fecking* on a number of occasions by speakers in Scotland. On further discussion, it has appeared that these speakers come from the Glasgow area. They added that their use of this form could be strongly connected to their links with the Irish community in Glasgow. At least four of the five speakers who I heard using this form had Irish family connections. Further research would need to be carried out to investigate whether this holds, but it is an interesting observation, nonetheless.

This paper regards *fecking* as an existing euphemistic taboo form and not necessarily a phonological variation of *fucking*. This form and its variants, as well as others shown in Figure 2, will be examined later in more detail and in relation to age and gender under Section 4.2.1.

Looking beyond single word forms, we also find two- and three-word clusters featuring FUK occurring in the corpus: *fuck it*, *fuck sake* and *for fuck’s sake* with *fuck all*, *fuck off* and *fuck that* featuring less often (see Figure 3).

Having found that *fucking* is the most common form of the lemma FUK, that there are three frequent clusters containing *fuck* (*fuck it*, *fuck sake* and *for fuck’s sake* as illustrated in Figure 3), and that *fecking* and *fecker* appear as ‘diluted’ forms of FUK, I shall now focus on these items in relation to gender and age.

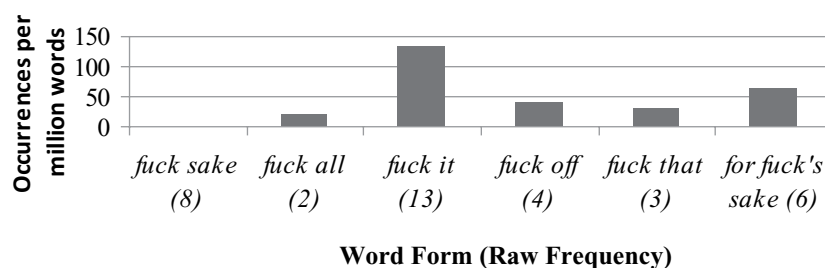


Figure 3: Frequency of two- and three-word clusters of FUCK in CAG-IE (occurrences per million words)

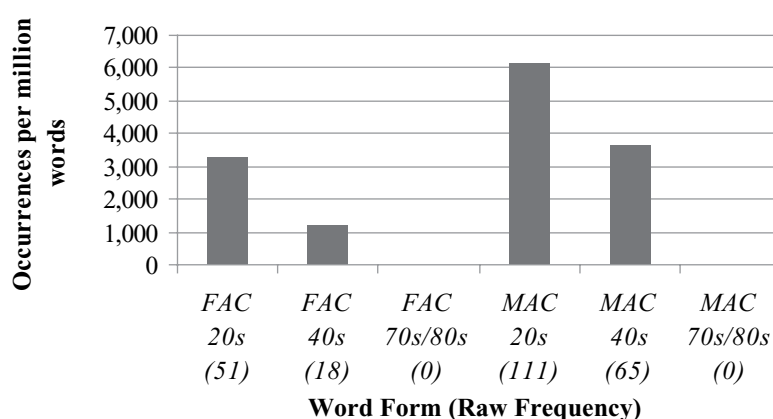


Figure 4: Frequency of FUCK in terms of age in MAC and FAC (occurrences per million words)

4.1.1 FUCK and gender

Having identified the common forms of FUCK in Section 4.1, wordlists were then created for each of the gender-differentiated corpora in order to examine the gender balance in relation to the use of FUCK in the corpus (see Figure 4).

The results of this search show that FUCK is noticeably more frequent in the male data than in the female. This finding has parallels with McEnery *et al.*'s (2000) study where they also found that FUCK occurred more frequently in their (British) male data. It also fits in with McEnery and Xiao's (2004) study on British written data, where they found male authors to use FUCK more than twice as frequently as female authors.

4.1.2 FUCK and age

Having examined gender, the wordlists for each of the age groups in both the male and female data were examined in order to establish the distribution and

frequency of FUCK with regards to the age variable in both MAC and FAC. Here it was established that the males used FUCK much more often than the women. There were 184 occurrences (3,876 times per million words) for the males in comparison with seventy-two occurrences (1,483 times per million words) for the females. The taboo forms *feckers* and *fecking* are also considered in this analysis.

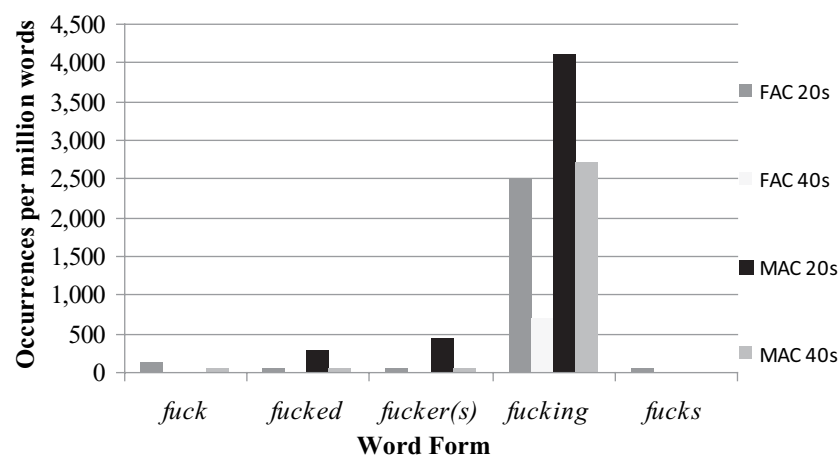
While we had established earlier that FUCK was most common in the male data, we can now also tell from our age-related analysis that it is most frequent in the speech of young males in their twenties, MAC 20s and also the MAC 40s. With regards to the female speech, although FUCK occurs less often, we also find a high frequency of occurrences of FUCK in the FAC 20s in comparison to the other female age groups. There are only seventeen occurrences of FUCK in the FAC 40s, whereas there are seventy-five occurrences in the MAC 40s (1,172 v. 4,238 times per million words). It is striking that there are no examples of FUCK amongst any of the speakers, male or female, in the 70s/80s group. What this initial age and gender analysis shows us is that, in this data, first, FUCK seems to be a marker of young adulthood in that we find high occurrences of the form in both the MAC 20s and FAC 20s. Secondly, it also indicates that it is a marker of maleness with very high frequencies being found in the MAC 20s and MAC 40s and, thirdly, it seems to highlight that expletives such as FUCK are very uncommon in the speech of elderly people. We will examine these findings in more detail in Section 4.2.

If we look more closely at the forms of FUCK that were found earlier in Figure 2, focussing on age and gender, we find an interesting distribution of the various forms in these sociolinguistic variables, as is illustrated in Figure 5. This examination, once again, indicates the high frequency of *fucking* in the data, but this analysis gives us additional information in terms of age and gender. It shows that *fucking* is most common in the MAC 20s, followed in second place by the MAC 40s and in third place by the FAC 20s. Behind *fucking* in terms of frequency (though much less frequent) we find the form *fuck* which is again most frequent in the MAC 20s followed by the MAC 40s. The other forms, such as *fucked*, *fucker(s)* and in particular *fucks*, are all, as can be seen in Figure 5, much less frequent. As *fucking* is by far the most common form, we will examine it in more detail in Section 4.2.

4.2 *Fucking* in CAG–IE

4.2.1 *Fucking* in FAC 20s

Fucking is the most common expletive in the female data and, in particular, in the FAC 20s cohort. From an examination of its use in context,



Raw figures:

FAC 20s:	2	FAC 20s:	1	FAC 20s:	1	FAC 20s:	39	FAC 20s:	1
FAC 40s:	0	FAC 40s:	0	FAC 40s:	0	FAC 40s:	10	FAC 40s:	0
MAC 20s:	0	MAC 20s:	5	MAC 20s:	8	MAC 20s:	74	MAC 20s:	0
MAC 40s:	1	MAC 40s:	1	MAC 40s:	1	MAC 40s:	48	MAC 40s:	0

Figure 5: Frequency of FUCK in CAG-IE (occurrences per million words) according to gender and age

fucking, as previously highlighted, functions predominantly as an amplifier which communicates emotions vis-à-vis an addressee, as well as releasing emotional tension (Rodríguez González, 2002; Zimmerman, 2002; and Stenström, 2006). This function is illustrated a number of times in FAC. For example, we see it in Extract 1, where one speaker, Linda, wants to highlight the force of her annoyance about waking up in the middle of the night.

Extract 1

Linda: So I woke up the following morning well I didn't I woke up in the middle of the night and that was so *fucking* annoying.

In Extract 2, Ruth suddenly realises that a friend of hers has a car and therefore sees a solution to a transport problem. The strength of the success of this sudden realisation is communicated through the use of *fucking*.

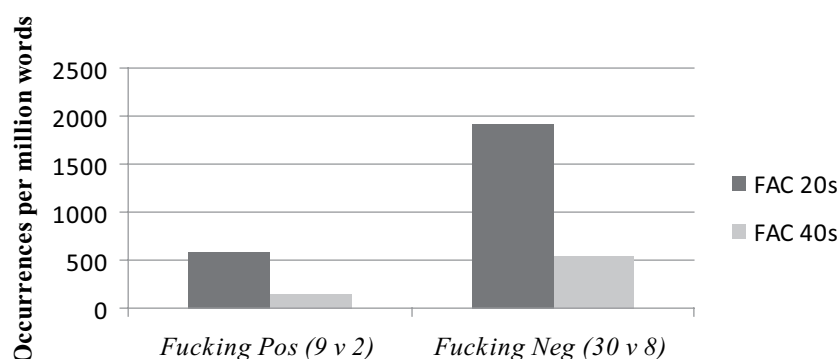


Figure 6: Evaluative meaning of *fucking* in FAC 20s and FAC 40s (occurrences per million words)

Extract 2

Sarah: I know she could stay in your room when you're not there and my room as well we could get another mattress and put it on the floor.

Ruth: She has a *fucking* car too doesn't she?

Sarah: Yeah that's what the best thing to do is.

This use of the form adds force to the emotion being communicated and also communicates a certain attitude, which can be both positive and negative. In examining the use of *fucking* through the use of concordance lines, it was established that the form in FAC has both positive and negative evaluative meaning. An example of positive meaning is evident in Extract 3, which is taken from FAC 20s.

Extract 3

Linda: She's a *fucking* ticket.

This example illustrates that the person being spoken about is very good fun (*ticket*) with *fucking* being used as an amplifier. A positive evaluation is inherent in the word *ticket* and *fucking* is used to intensify that meaning. An example of negative meaning, also taken from FAC 20s, can be seen in the Extract 4.

	<i>FUCK</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>FAC</i> <i>20s</i>	<i>Raw</i> <i>freq.</i>	<i>FAC</i> <i>40s</i>	<i>Raw</i> <i>freq.</i>	<i>FAC</i> <i>70s/ 80s</i>
1	'Fucking'	Intensifier	2,499	39	689	10	0
2	'Fuck it'	It doesn't matter	192	3	69	1	0
3	'Oh for fuck's sake'	Interjection	0	0	69	1	0
4	'Fecking'	Intensifier	128	2	69	1	0
5	'Fucked (off)'	Fed up	64	1	0	0	0
6	'Fuck off!'	Go away	0	0	69	1	0
7	'Fuck off!'	Reaction signal of surprise and/or disbelief	0	0	69	1	0
8	'Fucked (up)'	Psychologically maladjusted	64	1	0	0	0
9	'Fucked'	Ruined/no chance	64	1	0	0	0
	Total		3,011	47	1,034	15	0

Table 3: Forms of FUCK in FAC 20s and 40s (occurrences per million words)

Extract 4

Linda: I was thinking during the end of the lunch that if I did a half an hour's work on the *fucking* proof-reading that [...]

The use of *fucking* before proof-reading indicates that the speaker does not like proof-reading, and possibly finds it tedious and boring. In an examination of the use of *fucking* in terms of positive and negative meaning in FAC 20s, it was established that its use was predominantly in negative contexts. If we compare the positive and negative evaluative meaning of *fucking* in the FAC 20s with that of the FAC 40s, it is found that both age groups tend to favour the use of *fucking* in communicating negative meaning.

By using *fucking* in such a way, the speaker is communicating his or her impression or attitude of what they are discussing as well as, at times, giving force to their emotions. There are no occurrences of *fuck* in the corpus which refer to its literal meaning 'to have sex'. It would appear from examining *fucking* in context that, as a form, it has undergone semantic bleaching and pragmatic strengthening across the age groups, especially for the FAC 20s group. As a result, its original meaning has more or less disappeared and the new, pragmatic meanings have evolved due to their frequent use in casual conversation (see Table 3). This shift takes place during

the grammaticalisation process (see Stenström, 2006: 13), and is illustrated here through its frequency in the FAC 20s.

Bailey and Timm (1976) make a similar point, arguing that the younger women they interviewed seem to view strong expletives more as stylistic devices which seem to be relatively free of moral or ethical overtones. This is reflected in a comment made by a 19-year-old speaker in Bailey and Timm's (1976) study. She stated 'I like *that's fucked* or using *fucking* as an adjective and am impressed by others who can effectively interject a curse into conversation. It makes for dynamism in communication'.

However, while the use of *fucking* seems, from these findings, to be free from moral or ethical overtones in the 20s age group, there are exceptions which illustrate that ethical liberty is not always present in young adulthood. This was observed in an examination of one of the transcripts in FAC 20s which consisted of three speakers. Two of the speakers, Amy and Linda, used *fucking* significantly more often than the third speaker, Ciara. Examples of their uses of the word are illustrated in Extracts 5 and 6.

Extract 5

Amy: The house is *fucking* horrible I thought our place was bad enough like

Extract 6

Linda: She has a *fucking* car too doesn't she?

Amy and Linda appeared to be more involved in the conversation and more confident, particularly in story-telling. By conducting further interviews with the speakers, it was established that these speakers knew one another better and shared closer bonds than they did with Ciara. This could help to explain why they felt more relaxed about using the expletive, whilst there are no examples of its use by Ciara. What is interesting, however, is that although Ciara does not use the expletive, we find that she begins to use the euphemistic form, *fecking*, about half way through the interaction. From this, we may surmise that Ciara is aware of the fact that the others are using *fucking* to intensify emotions as well as to indicate, perhaps, how well they know one another and camaraderie. She is aware that use of the word is indicative of a certain linguistic liberty and would seem to be a marker of belonging to the in-group of the other two speakers. It could be argued that Ciara adapts her language as a form of convergence in a bid to fit into the in-group. However, as she is still unsure of her standing in relation to the other speakers and the group they may belong to, she acts politely by opting for *fecking* and avoiding the strong form. From this, it may seem that one's use of expletives would still seem to be very much influenced not only by age, but also by other contextual constraints such as how well the speakers know their interlocutors—even within their own particular age

group – and how they want or indeed do not want to be perceived by them. While the younger speakers seem to be more comfortable with *fucking*, even they seem to be aware of the potentially controversial status of the word. In the interviews carried out with the participants, Ciara stated that she was aware of her choice to use *fecking* as opposed to *fucking*. She said that she would have felt uncomfortable using the stronger form as she did not know her interlocutors very well.

Within this female cohort, we find a significant decrease in its use after the FAC 20s especially with regard to the FAC 40's use of the expletive. This may have to do with conservatism setting in due to professional lives (Baron, 1986) and the speech that is expected and required in such settings, or perhaps it is associated with parenthood and the responsibility for linguistic politeness that comes with it. It may also have to do with the women's perception of the expletive. When interviewed, the women in the FAC 40s cohort all stated that *fuck* was a 'coarse word' and too frequent use of the expletive gave a negative impression of a woman, for example, it gave rise to one appearing to be uneducated or to belonging to a lower social class. They noted that, while in certain circumstances (e.g., with very close friends or family) it was acceptable when used to release emotional tension, outside this context, they tended to make efforts to avoid it.

In interviews carried out with the FAC 70s/80s group, speakers highlighted that while growing up in the 1930s and 1940s, FUCK was never a word that was used openly. One particular speaker mentioned that, while they were aware the word existed, people rarely used it. She highlighted that men would never use it in the company of women and even when used in male–male company, it was never, even then, used very frequently. She added that she had never heard her father use the expletive and he would not have tolerated such bad use of language from his children. She noted that, in the Catholic lifestyle that they grew up in, such language would have gone strongly against their religious beliefs. This would certainly seem to play a part in accounting for the absence of *fucking* and other expletives from the language of this particular cohort. She concluded that, should something cause great annoyance, she might use the expletive now – though she said it is very rare for her to do so. These insights into the use of expletives in the FAC 70s/80s group indicate the relevance and importance of religion in influencing the language used by this elderly cohort. Other factors such as personality or mood, which tend to relate to individuals could also play a role in the use of taboo forms.

4.2.2 *Fucking* in MAC 20s

When examining the use of *fucking* in context in the MAC 20s, we find similar patterns to those found in the FAC 20s. Its primary use is as an amplifier, as in Extract 7, and as a pre-modifying emphasiser, as in Extract 8:

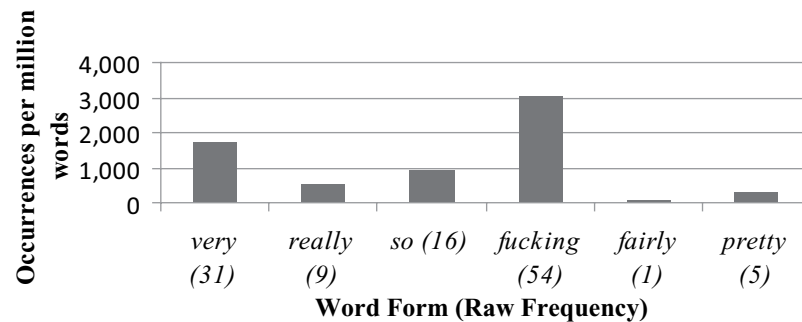


Figure 7: Amplification in MAC 20s (occurrences per million words)

Extract 7

Colin: Oh I'd be delighted too [*sic*] but he's *fucking* useless

Extract 8

Colin: I'm saying it's unusual soccer but I *fucking* did the exact same.

In an examination of the use of *fucking* as an amplifier and a pre-modifying emphasiser, we find that the MAC 20s use *fucking* more as a pre-modifying emphasiser. There are thirty-two occurrences (1,779 per million words) as a pre-modifying emphasiser whereas there are twenty-three occurrences (1,278 per million words) as an amplifier. Interestingly, the MAC 20s use *fucking* as their most common amplifier, more than the combined totals of *very*, *so*, *really*, *pretty* and *fairly* (see Figure 7).

This reinforces the view that in the MAC 20s, and as we saw in Section 4.2.1 with the FAC 20s, semantic bleaching and pragmatic strengthening seem to have taken place, and this is more pronounced amongst the males. The males, it seems, regard *fucking* as an extremely common and emotionally charged form that they frequently use to 'add' to their expression. If we examine some concordance lines more closely as in, for example, Figure 8, we find that the high use of *fucking* adds dramatic intensity or dynamism to their discourse.

We could, perhaps, account for this intensity as a feature of how males interact. In an interview, one speaker from the MAC 20s group said that males expect coarse or taboo language in their interactions. The use of *fucking* as an intensifier seems to be a sign of how a particular type of masculinity is constructed and maintained. It could be viewed as a tool that is used to facilitate bonding in close male friendships in line with topics about sports and acquaintances. By using such a form, the speaker is communicating in a way that is different from what is accepted by mainstream politeness codes and thus highlighting that he is at ease enough with his interlocutor to express himself in such a way.

1. yeah I'm not too sure how the	fucking	thing works I have to ring the
2. and then all of a sudden he got	fucking	a strike by Macca and ah I think
3. alright. Oh he's as tough as	fucking	nails but he's got no skill
4. Sciscento. go on go on ah shit.	Fucking	Prick <laughing>
5. seven or eight like. What a	fucking	eegit for y'know I think
6. in goal or out field. He's the	fucking	dude. He was some
7. of our place running around oh	fucking	hell that's a bad one
8. I remember the	fucking	head on him coming in
9. score again? that was those	fucking	I couldn't even is it raining
10. she said anyway he started	fucking	Her out of it like. Yeah?

Figure 8: Concordance lines for *fucking* in MAC 20s

An additional explanation for the high frequency of *fucking* may be provided by looking at how the two sexes view the expletives. It would seem that males in close peer groups tend not to see it as a strong expletive but as a weaker form which allows emotional release and a type of bonding to take place, while females always tend to view it as being a relatively harsh form even when used with peers. This view that males and females rank this form differently in terms of harshness, or, indeed, in terms of the 'taboo factor', may provide another insight into the great imbalance in its frequency between the sexes. Like the FAC 20s, we find that the MAC 20s also use *fucking* almost exclusively with negative evaluative meaning (see Figure 12).

The negative meaning ranges from comments on televised football matches, as in Extract 9, to engaging in banter with one another, as in Extract 10, or to gossiping about past team mates, as in Extract 11:

Extract 9

Tom: Christ sake. *Fuck*. Aaah Christ. Come on Amartini. Ah he was supposed to volley that. Get up there Sciscento.

Keith: Go on Sciscento go on aaah.

Tom: *Fucking* prick.

Extract 10

Colin: That's good ah Tom boy cop on will ya that's a *fucking* bad attitude you have there <laughing>

Extract 11

Colin: Ah yea he's a *fucking* idiot.

Tom: Oh he's a pure idiot altogether.

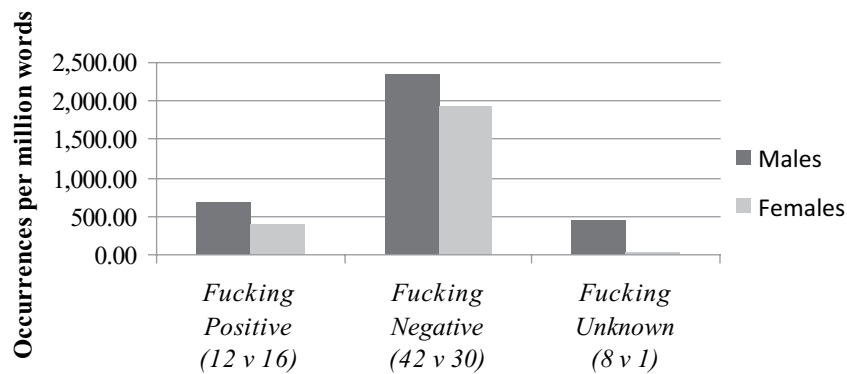


Figure 9: Positive and negative evaluative meaning of *fucking* in MAC 20s and FAC 20s (occurrences per million words)

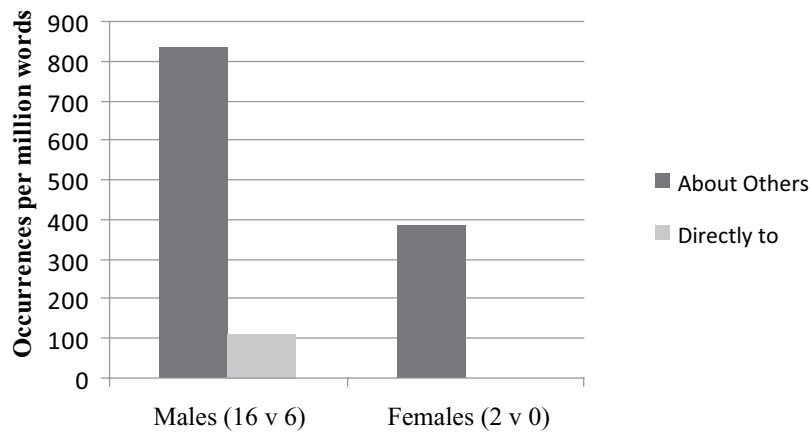


Figure 10: Negative evaluative meaning of *fucking* in MAC 20s and FAC 20s (occurrences per million words)

If we compare the males' use of *fucking* in positive or negative utterances with the females' usage, we find both groups use it predominantly to express negative meaning (see Figure 9).

If we examine the negative use of *fucking*, we find that it is most often used in both groups to talk about other people, for example, from MAC 20s 'he's a *fucking* idiot' (see Figure 10).

4.2.3 *Fucking* in MAC 40s

In the MAC 40s, we see an extremely high frequency of *fucking*; this highlights, once again, the use of the expletive as a marker of masculinity.

Here we see that it seems to accompany the topics that are being discussed. While sport was the main topic of the MAC 20s, here we find that the most common topics are fishing and areas related to fishing. This cohort uses the expletive much more as a pre-modifying emphasiser than as an amplifier. There are thirty-four occurrences (1,921 per million words) of *fucking* as a pre-modifying emphasiser and only five occurrences (282 per million words) of the word as an amplifier.

As I argued earlier, masculinity is constructed through the high frequency of the expletive in the MAC 40s group. This high frequency may also be reflective of the fact that the speakers do not view *fucking* as a very strong form. However, another explanation may be provided by examining the topics discussed by this cohort. The topics they talk about include a boat going on the rocks, excessive export costs, a sensationalist daily news article and minus temperatures in the Arctic Circle. Such dramatic topics call for language that can express intensity and emotion, hence the use of *fucking*, as well as more religious references such as *Jesus Christ* (see Farr and Murphy, 2009). There are no examples of *fucking* in the oldest male cohort which reflects the findings in the same age group in FAC.

5. Closing comments

The corpus used in this study is a small corpus of approximately 90,000 words, which provides a snapshot of the linguistic behaviour of three different age groups across genders at a particular point in time. It provides an insight into the use of taboo forms, particularly FUCK, in an Irish context, but, more specifically, it focusses on how our use of taboo language is influenced by the life-stage we occupy as well as our gender. With regard to the use of FUCK in terms of age and gender in contemporary Irish English, this paper concludes that FUCK is a high frequency form in Irish English and is typically more characteristic of younger adults in the twenties age bracket and seems to be used most frequently by males. Although the corpus is small and cannot make strong claims in terms of generalisability, this data still provides interesting insights into age- and gender-related variation in language use, which can be explored further in larger corpora. It is important to note that the small sample size (thirty-one participants) makes it difficult to make generalisations to the wider population, and so further data would need to be collected in order to corroborate the findings.

Whilst I have focussed in this paper on the influence of age and gender on the use of taboo language, there are indeed other important factors that influence the frequency and use of FUCK. These include the duration of the interlocutors' relationship as well as their impression of the intensity of their friendship. One participant in the 20s group felt uncomfortable using FUCK around some of her friends that she had known for a few years, but with whom she did not feel she had a strong friendship. Some speakers in the

forties group mentioned that the use of taboo forms around people that were not well known to them ran the risk of the speaker appearing coarse or very impolite, and this was not desirable.

Another factor which arose in the older cohort was the influence of religion and Catholic upbringing on one's linguistic behaviour. The speakers in the 70s/80s group highlighted that religious piety was one of the main reasons for their avoidance of taboo forms. They claimed that religion permeated all aspects of their life when they were growing up, and this included their spoken discourse.

In addition to the corpus study which involved the analysis of frequencies and concordances, this paper supplemented the corpus findings with interview data. The interviews were carried out with the speakers in the corpus and the results illuminated the interpretation of the data. The interviews allowed for confirmation or discussion of the findings. They allowed for another view of the data and, as a result, gave a more holistic account of the findings. This was especially apparent when discussing the reasons for the scarcity of taboo forms in the 70s/80s cohort in Section 4.2.1.

It is important to acknowledge that classifications of taboo language are constantly evolving and changing. Literature highlights, for example, that listeners in 2000 (Internet Report) are less offended by hearing *fuck* on television. It is demonstrated in the present paper, that younger speakers are more creative with their use of *fuck*, using it frequently as a verb, a noun, an adjective, an adverb and an interjection in every day casual conversation. It has also been seen that one's perception and use of taboo language seems to be influenced not only by the society we live in, but by the society and culture that is experienced from childhood. This was illustrated by the absence of taboo language in the FAC 70s/80s data as well as by the speakers themselves, who explained their views on taboo language in the interviews. Furthermore, other factors which are more specific to the individual are influential in the use of taboo forms such as religiosity, mood, how long the speakers have known one another and so on.

In conclusion, it would appear that similar to British English (McEnery and Xiao, 2004; and Stenström, 2006), FUCK, in Irish English, is a high frequency item among younger age groups, especially males. It may, therefore, be interesting to examine the use of FUCK in British English and Irish English further to account for differences and similarities across Englishes. This study has shown that the use of *fecking* and *fecker* seem to be characteristic of Irish English, but that this claim would require further research and exploration, and some comparative work with British English. This small corpus of Irish English indicates pathways for future research on taboo language. It shows evidence of other taboo forms such as intellectual insults, abusives involving the names of animals, as well as others which would shed further light on the use of taboo discourse in an Irish English context. It would also allow us to account for their usage across different age groups and gender as well as examine patterns of interactions between close friends and family.

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